THE EQUIPMENT GRAVES FROM TOMIS

LIVIU PETCULESCU (Bucureşti)

From the 1st to the 3rd centuries A. D. the weapon graves were particularly infrequent in the Roman Empire. However, a small number of such graves is still known but they are considered, with good reasons, to have been used by the uncompletedly romanized populations: the rich weapon burials by Roman auxiliary officers recruited from provincial aristocrats, mostly of Oriental and Thracian origin, and the poor ones especially by German auxiliary or irregular troops.

Besides these graves there are also funeral assemblages containing only personal military equipment i.e. belts which were largely neglected by the "military" archaeologists. Yet as the presence of the belts in the graves was obviously intended to emphasize the relationship of the buried people with the Roman army even after their death, I think that the meaning of these burials was similar with that of the weapon graves.

In the north-western part of Moesia Inferior which represents today Romanian region of Dobroudja there are known a few weapon graves on the *limes:* at Ostrov[1], Capidava[2], Barboşi[3], a bridgehead North of the Danube, and Noviodunum[4]. Besides, also on the *limes* at Canlia[5], Capidava[6] and Noviodunum[7] there are equipment graves. Finally two funeral assemblages containing belts were found at Tomis.

If the presence in the cemeteries of the military settlements of burials producing soldier equipment is easily understandable, the appearance of such kind of graves at Tomis, a Greek colony, is worth of more comment.

Both Tomis funeral assemblages were recovered by C. Chera who conducted the rescue excavations in the extramural area of the town. I am deeply indebted to him for allowing me to use them in advance of his own publication.

Grave no.1

The grave was found on 25.11.1992 on M. Eminescu street, no. 2, on the see-cliff, inside the northern cemetery of the Roman town.

It is an inhumation burial in a well-pit with a longitudinal niche of 1.95 x 0.40 x 0.45 m.

The grave goods consist of a bronze coin and a set of bronze fittings.

The coin, an *as* from Faustina I, was issued by Antoninus Pius after A. D. 141 but most probably after A. D. 148[8].

The set of belt fittings consists of a buckle, three elongated openwork plates, two openwork peltate plates with attachment rings and two bipartite strap terminals (fig. 1/1).

The oval buckle with internal volutes and splayed attachment loop is of a common 2nd century type. The openwork elongated plates of 20.5 mm of width are of a curviliniar design making a floral ornament which is met across the Empire in different variants. A close parallel of Tomis example originates in Dura Europos[9] but other more distant parallels are met on the Raetian limes at Schierenhof, Pfünz and in the cemetery of Neuburg an der Donau[10]. The peltate plates are provided with rings for attaching the sheath of a knife. A very similar but not identical piece was discovered in the military settlement of Barboşi[11]. The strap terminals are of a type which was the most common in the military milieus from Moesia Inferior and Dacia in the 2nd century A. D.[12]

In conclusion the belt represents an example of the common narrow 2nd century belt provided with two strap terminals which was intended not as a weapon-belt like its 1st century predecessors but merely for carrying a knife. On the contrary, the decoration of its mounts presents some peculiarities which point to the production of the belt to the Lower Danube region, probably even in Moesia Inferior, toward the middle or in the 3rd quarter of the 2nd century A. D.

Taking into consideration the date of the coin and the period of time this type of belt was used, the grave can be placed between A. D. 141/148 and approx. A. D. 200 but more probably in or around the 3rd quarter of the 2nd century A. D.

The form of the grave pit that became frequent at Tomis in the 3rd and 4th centuries A. D. came from the Orient, which means that one has to count with a possible Oriental origin of the dead.

THRACO-DACICA, tomul XIX, nr. 1-2, Bucureşti, 1998, p.153-156

Grave no.2

On 29.06.1985, on Republicii Boulevard, about 150 m beyond the town wall in the area of the northern Roman cemetery of Tomis a shell limestone sarcophagus, partially robbed, containing at least 14 inhumations was uncovered.

The rest of the skeletons and the grave goods still preserved were mixed together and it was impossible for the investigator to separate the pieces according to the funeral assemblages they belonged to.

Among the grave gifts recovered from the sarcophagus, there is a set of bronze fittings representing the furnishing of an equipment burial.

The set consists of a buckle plate, a counter plate, three other identical rectangular plates, a square plate with semicircular loop, four other rectangular plates with baluster-moulded central bars, two studs and four strap terminals (fig.1/2).

The buckle represents a common 2nd century oval buckle with central volutes and rectangular attachment loop of the same type as the buckle from the Tomis grave no.1. The plates of 18.5 mm of width are also of an usual type which consists of narrow rectangular appliqués with central opening[13]. The baluster-moulded central bar present on four plates is more specific but still not a rare feature of belt plates. I know such bars in Dacia at Stolniceni[14], Apulum[15], and Lechinţa de Mureş[16] and in Raetia in the fortress from Eining-Unterfeld dated approx. A. D. 170/180[17] and in the Buch fort built towards the middle of the 2nd century A. D.[18] Besides, it is likely that many of the narrow rectangular mounts with central openings as e.g. a group of four such plates from Copăceni fort in Dacia were originally provided with/or at least intended to receive such bars[19].

The domed studs with peltate expansion were used for fixing a knife-sheath. Their decoration i.e. their expansions is highly specific and as far as I know is still unparallelled. However a stud of a similar shape and size but lacking the peltate expansion is met on the belt set from the Lechinţa de Mureş burial dated in the middle or the third quarter of the 2nd century A. D. which represents the best parallel for the entire Tomis set[20].

The strap terminals are usual items of the same type as the terminals from the 1st equipment burial from Tomis.

In sum, the Tomis set seems to represent a Danubian variant of the 2nd century A. D. narrow military belt standard and can be dated in the second half of the 2nd century. The peculiarities of its decorations, especially the peltate expansions of the studs, point to its production in Moesia Inferior.

Discussion

At the end of this survey I have to make some general remarks. First of all is that the evidence is severely limited by the fact that the equipment graves were unearthed by rescue excavations which permit only few observations on the burials.

Then there is the problem whether the equipment graves are certainly military burials. The answer to this question is linked to the problem if in the 2nd-3rd centuries A. D. civilians were allowed to wear personal equipment items used by the soldiers - like the belts were - or the civilian and military dresses were completely different. So far there is no generally accepted answer to this question but there is some indirect evidence for the attribution of the equipment graves to the peoples linked to the Roman army. So, such burials which are remarkably few, were discovered mainly in cemeteries of the military settlements and in many instances the belts were associated in the funeral furnishings with weapons or other military items - like oak crowns.

Both Tomis equipment graves were placed in the same cemetery of the town and had more or less the same dating - the 2nd half of the 2nd century A. D. At variance with the majority of the contemporary equipment graves from Dacia and Moesia Inferior which were cremation burials[21], they are inhumations. The explanation of the use of inhumation in the Tomis burials consists either in the ethnic origin of the buried people who could be Orientals or in the fact that they were part of urban population which at this time, following the model of Rome, fashioned more and more inhumation.

Anyway, in these graves which were poorly provided according to Roman standards, people the using inhumations like the other Tomis inhabitants were buried. By their specific gifts they have tried to emphasize their relationship with the army, which in richer burials was made in a more Roman way, that is, by inscriptions or sculptural representations.

NOTES

1. A. Rădulescu, *Elmi bronzei di Ostrov*, Dacia, 7, 1963, 535-551, figs. 1-11.

2. Unpublished. Excavations conducted by V. Cheluţă-Georgescu.

3. V. Pârvan, *Castrul de la Poiana şi drumul roman prin Moldova de Jos*, ARMSI, s. 2, 36 (1913-1914), 112; S. Sanie, *Civilizaţia romană la est de Carpaţi şi romanitatea pe teritoriul Moldovei*, Iaşi, 1981, 82-83, pl. 65.

4. G. Simion, *Descoperiri noi în necropola de la Noviodunum. Raport preliminar*, Peuce, 9, 1984, 83, unillustrated.

5. Unpublished. Excavations conducted lately by E. Moscalu.

6. Unpublished. Excavations conducted by V. Cheluţă-Georgescu.

7. G. Simion, *op. cit.*, (note 4), pl. X.

8. Gh. Poenaru-Bordea, B. Mitrea, *Découvertes monétaires en Roumanie 1992 (36)*, Dacia, 37, 1993, 314, no. 47.

9. T. G. Frisch, in *The Excavations at Dura Europos. Final Report IV. Part IV/I*, New Haven, 1949, 22, no. 56, pl.V.

10. J. Oldenstein, *Zur Ausrüstung römischer Auxiliareinheiten*, BerRGK, 57, 1976, no. 242 (Schierenhof), nos. 243-245 (Pfünz), p. 134, fig. 1a (Neuburg an der Donau).

11. S. Sanie, *op. cit.*, (note 3), pls. 49/6, 51/5.

12. L. Petculescu, *Military equipment graves in Roman Dacia*, JRMES, 6, 1995, 124, nos. 3-4, pl. 1/3-4.

13. E.G. a set of rectangular plates with peltates projections from South Shields: L. Allason Jones, *The small finds*, in R. Miket, *The Roman Fort at South Shields. Excavations of the Defences 1977-1981*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1983, 114, no. 97, fig. 72.

14. Unpublished piece in Muzeul Judeţean Vâlcea from Rm. Vâlcea.

15. Unpublished. Muzeul Naţional al Unirii from Alba Iulia, inv. nos. 3491 and 3494.

16. K. Horedt, *Untersuchungen zur Frühgeschichte Siebenbürgens*, Bucharest, 1958, 20, figs. 4/2, 5.

17. S. Jutting, *Lesefunde aus dem römischen Lager Eining-Unterfeld*, Unpublished M. A. thesis, 1992, no. 117. For the fortress see H. Schönberger, *Die römischen Truppenlager der frühen und mittleren Kaiserzeit zwischen Nordsee und Inn*, BerRGK, 66, 1985, 488-9, E 90.

18. J. Oldenstein, *op. cit.*, (note 10), no. 832. *For the fort see H. Schönberger, op. cit.* (note 17), 485, E 75.

19. D. Tudor, *Materiale arheologice din castrul Praetorium I - Copăceni, judeţul Vâlcea, descoperite de Grigore G. Tocilescu*, Drobeta, 5, 1982, nos. 5, 6, 48, 50, figs. 2/5, 6 and 5/13.

20. K. Horedt, *op. cit.* (note 16), p. 20, fig. 4/3.

21. L. Petculescu, *op. cit.* (note 12).

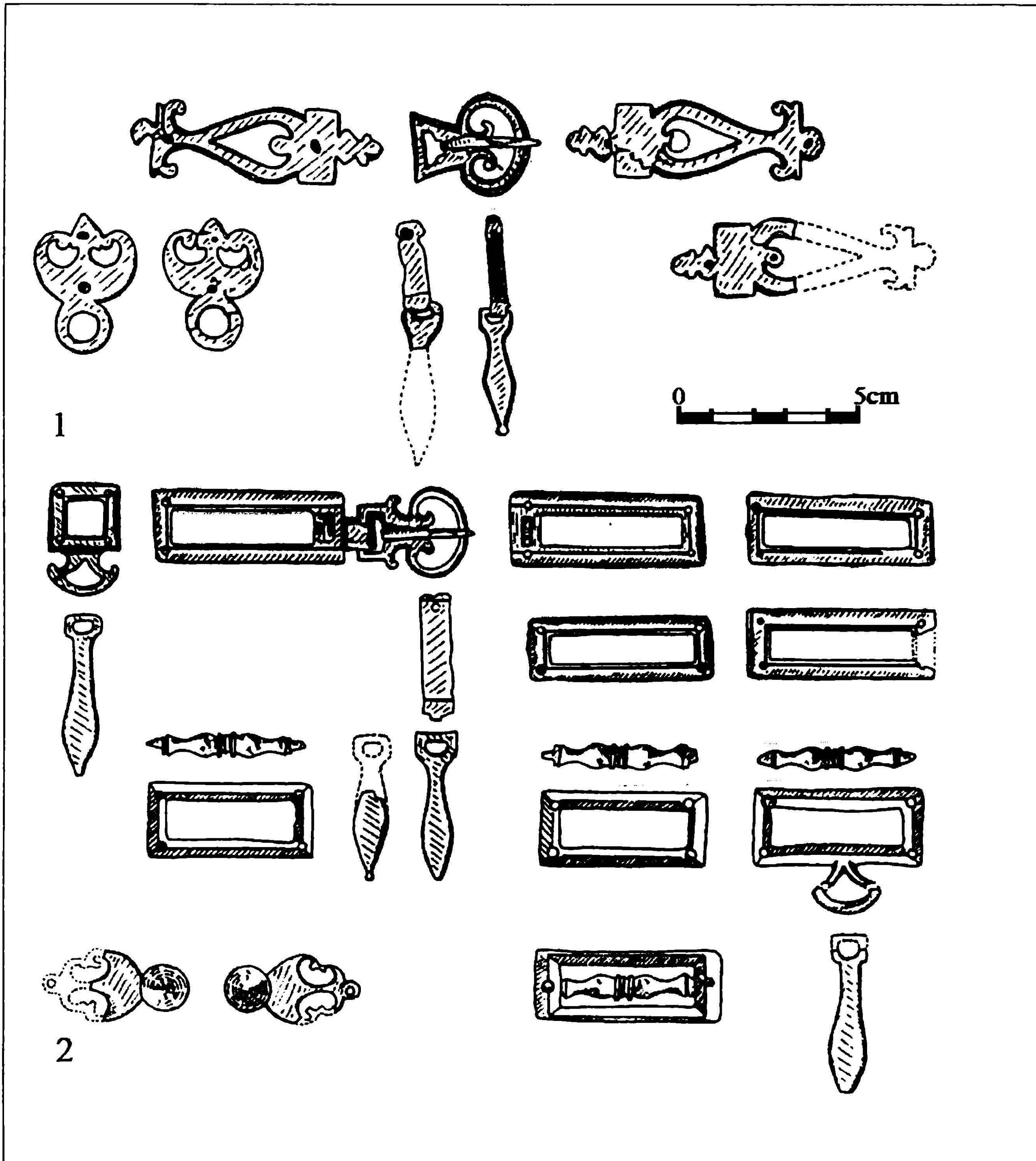


Fig. 1. Sets of bronze belt fittings from Tomis: 1 - Grave no. 1; 2 - Grave no. 2.